

Converted to Christ  
Acts 9:1-20  
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Kory Wilcoxson

Down through the years, the Bible has been a rich source of stories for Hollywood to dramatize on the big screen. “The Ten Commandments,” “The Prince of Egypt,” “The Passion of the Christ.” But no one has ever attempted to make a big-budget movie out of what I believe is one of the most dramatic scenes in the whole Bible, and that is the conversion of Paul on the road to Dasmascus.

Can’t you just see it? Paul – probably played by Russell Crowe or a bearded Brad Pitt – is set up as the bad guy, persecuting Christians and giving them the Tony Soprano treatment. Then, at the movie’s most spectacular moment, Paul riding his donkey toward Damascus when – cue the CGI special effects! – the sky opens and a bright light shines down on him. Then Jesus – voiced, of course, by James Earl Jones – says, “Paul, Paul, why do you persecute me?” I don’t know about you, but I would pay \$9.50 to see how Spielberg or Scorsese would interpret this story.

Paul certainly deserves that kind of attention for the role he plays in the development of Christianity. We’re first introduced to him at the stoning of Stephen, who was a Christ follower. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, tells us that Saul (his pre-Damascus road name) was there, giving approval of this execution. Then, in Chapter 8, Luke says, “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.”

Saul had it fixed in his mind that anyone who wasn’t for his Jewish beliefs was against them, include those who were claiming that Jesus was the Messiah. Paul was so zealous in his faith that he was willing to travel a week’s journey all the way to Damascus to arrest more Christians and make sure this dangerous fringe movement didn’t damage his beloved Judaism.

So Saul may have been intent on seizing the followers of Jesus, but instead it is Jesus who arrests Paul. A flash of light, a booming voice, a sudden blindness, and in an instant, the one who was Saul, the Christian persecutor, becomes Paul, the Christian missionary. This story is what a true conversion looks like.

For some people, that is. Although Luke never intends this to be the case, Paul’s conversion became the blueprint for how people were to come to faith. In fact, for centuries, a recitation of your conversion experience was often your ticket to church membership.

I play basketball on Fridays with a group of pastors from an evangelical church near me. I generally avoid any discussions of religion with them, but one day after we finished one of them began asking about our church and my own spiritual journey. I tried to steer the conversation in another direction because I knew where it was going, but before I could redirect, he said, “So, tell me your story.” My story? “Yeah, when were you saved?” In other words, he was asking for me to tell my Damascus road experience.

But here's the problem: I don't have one. I've never seen the bright flash of light, never heard the James Earl Jones voice, never had my world turned violently upside down by God. If you ask me, Paul had it easy! He gets the proof, and then comes to faith. Most of us come to faith, and then spend our lives looking for proof. I can't point to an exact day and time when I went from unbeliever to believer. Although there have been times when my doubt was much stronger than my certainty, I don't ever remember a time when I didn't believe.

If a dramatic conversion were a requirement to become a member of our church or denomination, I don't know how many of us be here today. I can't give a day and time I started believing, because I've never stopped. My story of faith doesn't have a "before" like Paul's does. I guess I could give the date I joined the church, but that was only an outward sign of an inward belief I'd possessed ever since I could remember. While I know some of us can point to an exact day and time of our conversion, not all of us can.

So then what are we to do with a story like Paul's? I would like you to entertain the thought that Paul's experience isn't the only conversion that takes place in our story today. I believe there is another one that may speak to us even more than Paul's.

After Paul is struck blind, he is sent on ahead to Damascus to wait for further instructions. Meanwhile, God comes to a man named Ananias and says, "Go to see a man named Saul from Tarsus and restore his sight." Now, Ananias is no dummy. He's read the paper and heard the water-cooler talk. He knows what Saul has been doing. In fact, Ananias may have a brother or a cousin who has already felt Paul's wrath. Have you ever had one of those moments where you say, "You want me to do WHAT, Lord?" This is one of those moments for Ananias. But he believes, so he goes to the former persecutor of the Christians, and greets him as "Brother Saul."

I doubt a non-believer would have responded as Ananias did. How do most of us react when we are called to extend hospitality to an enemy, to someone with whom we are at odds? I doubt Ananias wanted to do Paul any harm, but I darn sure bet he didn't want to do him any good.

I read an article recently about a church that was struggling with an issue similar to Ananias'. A man who had started attending the church and wanted to join was a convicted pedophile seeking to find forgiveness and a new start. As a church, what do you do there? I'm all for second chances, but I also have children. What do you do when God makes an enemy into an ally?

Ananias knew what Saul didn't: God is a God who can do new things. Saul was rooted in the past, not open to seeing Jesus as the Messiah. But Ananias realized that God can soften even the hardest of hearts. Someone else in Ananias' place might have sought vengeance for what Saul had done. But while we might wish for the destruction of our enemies, God works toward their transformation.

So who had the most dramatic conversion in this story? Was it Paul, who went from persecuting those who called on the name of the Lord to calling on that name himself? Or was it Ananias, who was able to lay healing hands on the man who was initially coming to Damascus to arrest Ananias and his friends?

With this story, I don't believe Luke is making a statement about how we should come to faith. I'm sure each of us here could tell a unique story about our faith journey, even if it's not completed yet. It's obvious that God works in a variety of ways to bring people to faith. Author Flannery O'Connor said, "I reckon the Lord knew the only way to

make a Christian out of Paul was to knock him off his horse.” But not everyone needs a strong push; some may only need a gentle nudge.

But the deeper message Luke offers here is what happens, not with Paul, but with Ananias. It’s interesting that Luke poses this one-time event conversion, but quickly follows it up with Ananias’ actions. Instead of Paul’s conversion being held up as the norm, I believe it is Ananias who teaches us about the experience of conversion.

Far from being a one-shot divine zap, I believe conversion needs to take place in us every day, because every day when we wake up, there’s something in us that isn’t Christ-like. It may be jealousy or resentment or pride or greed or immorality, but every day we need to be nudged or pushed or given a different kind of wakeup call than the one our alarm clock gives us. We never become so wise or so adept at faith that our conversion stops. I believe conversion is an ongoing process as we become less like who we were and more like who God wants us to be.

Ananias gives us a good benchmark to use so that we can mark our progress on this journey of conversion. When God comes to him with this task, Ananias responds with a simple, “Yes, Lord.” It’s probably not something Ananias would choose to do, but I believe the mark of a progressing Christian is that they have stopped doing what they want to do and started doing what Christ wants them to do. Conversion is the gradual, daily move from relying on ourselves to relying on God.

It’s not how we’re brought to faith that matters; what matters is that we finally do arrive. How can we know we’re arrived? When we start asking God, “What is it you want me to do?” The mark of conversion is a transformed life; Paul’s just happened to be a little more public than most others. But it’s Ananias who sets the more realistic example.

Ananias trusted God and was able to call Paul “brother.” Likewise, I’m converted every day as I am changed by my encounters with others, my observation of God’s creation, and countless experiences that provide new insights into the nature of God. I can’t prove my faith by pointing to a moment of conversion; I can only prove it in the same way Ananias did. He heard God’s call to him, and he obeyed.